

Islam

Definitions

A Muslim is someone who submits to the will of Allah (God), as it has been made known through the Qur'an ('Recitation') and the life of Muhammad, peace be upon him (pbuh) (570-632 CE). Muslims show respect for the prophet Muhammad, frequently adding 'Peace be upon Him' after saying or writing his name. These are the foundations of the religion of Islam (an Arabic word, meaning 'submission'). Islam is one of the Abrahamic faiths; its followers believe that it continues and fulfils the revelations of Judaism and Christianity, both of which came before it. Like members of all other faith communities, Muslims practise their religion with varying degrees of observance and commitment. For some it provides a strong sense of national or cultural identity. The crescent moon and star is an internationally recognised Islamic symbol, which appears on the flags of several Muslim countries.

Origins

Muhammad (pbuh) was born in the Arabian Peninsula in the 6th century. Widely trusted and admired among the people of the city of Makkah, at the age of 40 he started to receive the word of God from the archangel Gabriel. When he made these revelations known, a group of believers began to gather around him, while others turned against him. In the face of increasingly fierce opposition stoked by the city's tribal leaders, Muhammad (pbuh) and his companions emigrated from Makkah to Madinah in 622. This event, called Hijrah ('Migration') marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar. After a decade of tests and trials, they returned to Makkah in triumph, firmly establishing their community there. Muhammad (pbuh) settled in Madinah, where he died in 632.

Beliefs

Muslims believe in one God, neither male nor female, with no children, parents or partner, and with whom none can be associated. This omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent God was not created by anyone or anything, has always existed and always will exist, and rules over the universe with justice, mercy and compassion. At the core of a Muslim's faith is the declaration, 'There is none worthy of worship but God and Muhammad (pbuh) is His Messenger.' All Muslims believe this, as well as believing in the succession of prophets and messengers sent by God; in the existence and intervention of angels; in the Books sent by God; in the coming Day of Judgment and resurrection when the good and bad deeds of all those who have ever lived will be weighed.

Scripture

Muslims believe the Qur'an to be the word of God, revealed to Muhammad (pbuh) over a period of 23 years. Muhammad (pbuh) recited the verses as he received them, then taught them to his followers, who committed them to memory. Trusted scribes later wrote down the verses after rigorous cross-referencing and authentication by those who had memorised them. Great pains have been taken to ensure the purity of the text since that time. Muslims treat the Qur'an with reverence, in its printed form, or when hearing its verses recited aloud. Muslim children around the world are taught to read and recite it in the original Arabic in special classes. Most Muslims also look to stories from the life of Muhammad (pbuh) (Hadith) to help them follow his example.

Worship, Prayer & Meditation

Muslims are obliged to pray five times daily (dawn, midday, late afternoon, after sunset and late evening) out of love for God and obedience to His will. Muslims prepare for these prayers, which involve certain physical movements and must be said facing in the direction of Makkah, by ritual

washing. Muslims are encouraged to offer all these prayers communally at a Mosque (Masjid) especially the Friday afternoon prayers. Sufism, a mystical devotional tradition which encourages a greater sense of union between the believer and God, has influenced much Muslim belief and practice over the centuries. It has inspired the work of many great poets, such as Rumi and Hafiz, many of whom are widely read outside the Muslim community.

Spirituality

Muslims do not see their religious duties as being separate from how they try to live in the world every day. They strive to observe those spiritual obligations known as the 'Five Pillars of Islam': Shahadah – the declaration of faith; Salah – the five daily prayers; Zakah – giving 2.5% of one's income to the poor and needy; Sawm – fasting during Ramadan (the ninth month of the Islamic calendar); Hajj – every adult Muslim who is physically, financially and legally able must make at least one pilgrimage to Makkah. Muslims show respect for the prophet Muhammad (pbuh), frequently adding 'Peace be upon Him' after saying or writing his name. They normally do the same for other prophets and messengers recognised in the Qur'an, such as Jesus and Moses.

Lifestyle

Given its long history and widespread acceptance, it is no surprise that there is variation in the ways Muslims practise their faith. For example, Muslims should dress modestly, but this varies according to the cultural background of the individual, family or community. Muslims only eat meat from certain animals, slaughtered using the halal method. Muslims are prohibited from eating pork or any foods product derived from the pig (e.g. lard). Islam also forbids any sort of intoxicant, such as alcohol or drugs. Shari'ah (Islamic law) is widely observed by Muslims in their personal lives, addressing such issues as marriage, family rights and inheritance.

Muslims should live according to God's command, but also obey the law of the land where they reside.

Community

A strong sense of community has been a vital aspect of Islamic life from its earliest days. Muslims use the word *ummah* to denote the whole community of believers, regardless of denomination or tradition, wherever in the world they may live, and at whatever time. Such lively and daily awareness of their kinship helps Muslims overcome differences between them, reinforcing their sense of unity around the world and throughout history. It motivates them to care for all those members of the *ummah* who may be less well-off than themselves, or who may be victims of misfortune – natural or man-made – in other parts of the world.

Festivals

The Islamic calendar is based on the phases of the moon, so dates advance by approximately 11 days each year compared to the Gregorian calendar. This means it is hard to predict the exact dates of Muslim festivals in advance. 'Id al-Adha is the main Muslim festival, lasting three days, commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, Isma'il, as commanded by God. Muslims fast between dawn and sunset during the month of Ramadan. The holiest night in this month, Laylat al-Qadr ('The Night of Power') commemorates the revelation of the first verses of the Qur'an to the prophet Muhammad (pbuh). 'Id al-Fitr is celebrated at the end of Ramadan with three days of festivities, marked by acts of fellowship, peacemaking and charity.

Muslims worldwide

Islam is the second-largest religion in the world today, with Muslims making up more than a fifth of the world's population. Divisions that arose shortly after the passing of Muhammad (pbuh) have shaped the Muslim

Death & Bereavement

What Happens After Death?

Muslims believe that life in this world is only a short transitory state for human beings, and although it is important to live life to the full and make the most of every opportunity, it is only when they die, that the life of eternity begins, and they can finally meet with their Creator. The afterlife for a Muslims consists of a number of stages. There is a period in the grave, when the soul is believed to be questioned by angels. The space and conditions of the period in the grave will be subject to how one has lived their life. If a person has led a good and responsible life, the grave will be spacious and full of blessings, if otherwise it may be narrow and tight and not so pleasant.

Muslims also believe in the resurrection of the soul and the Day of Judgement. On this day every soul that has ever existed will rise before God and have his/her deeds in life presented before them. Depending on how they have lived their life, they may go to heaven or hell. These are real physical places for Muslims.

Muslims are always reminded to think and reflect upon the inevitability of death. Many verses in the Quran refer to the life hereafter, and remind Muslims to keep their actions and behaviour in check. As the life after is integral to how one lives their life now, it impacts on man's role on earth and the importance of his faith in relation to it. Being reminded of death, defines the purpose of a Muslim's life as a test, and Muslims believe that because human beings have free will, this understanding should encourage them to live a caring, responsible and useful life.

Muslims view life as a 'trust' from God and so have a responsibility to use it wisely and benefit those around them throughout it.

community over the centuries. The main groups which derived from this split are Sunni (the majority of the Muslim world) and Shi'ah (the largest numbers of which are in Iran, Iraq and the Lebanon). The vast majority of the world's Muslims are non-Arabs and do not speak Arabic; most now live in non-Muslim states; the country with the largest Muslim population is Indonesia. Muslim peoples have been able to retain the diversity of their own culture, while living with a sense of solidarity within a worldwide community.

Muslims in Britain

Middle Eastern and Indian Muslims – mostly seamen and traders – settled around British ports from the early 19th century onward. The first building dedicated to Muslim worship in Britain was in Cardiff in 1860; the first purpose-built Mosque was opened in Woking in 1889. After the First World War, many Muslims discharged from the British army settled here. Large numbers of Muslim workers from India and Pakistan were recruited for British industry in the 1950s and 60s. The 1970s saw further settlement from East Africa, then (more recently) refugees from Somalia and Bosnia. The 2001 Census records 1,546,626 Muslims in Britain – just under 3% of the population. Islam is Britain's second-largest religion. There are more than 700 purpose-built mosques around the country today.

As Death Approaches

Muslims will often receive many visitors in hospital during this time. These could be friends or relatives, all wanting to spend some time with their loved one before they depart. They may also provide support and pray for them during this period, as well as remind them of the purpose of life and their blissful destination. Many with terminal illnesses may prefer to be at home during this time, so it is easier for people to visit, prayers to be said and the Quran to be recited loudly or quietly to support them.

As prayer is such an important aspect of Muslim life (adult Muslims are required to pray five times a day), many visitors may request the use of a prayer room or a place to pray. Although it is not essential, some hospital staff may change the direction of the patients bed, so it is towards the South East (direction of Makkah), and therefore easier for the patient to pray/supplicate whilst sitting or lying down. This is a gesture of real kindness, not necessity, and is usually very much appreciated. It may also be helpful to have some copies of the Qur'an available for visitors to read or recite which is thought to provide a sense of peacefulness for the departing soul.

If there are members of the family or friends present at the time of death, they will encourage the dying person to pray and think of God, through *dhikr* (Quranic words, commanding the remembrance of God) and recite verses from the Quran. Family will also encourage the patient to repeat the *Shahada* the testimony of faith.

La illaha ill Allah

"There is no god, but Allah"

These should be the last words heard before death, and as Muslims are welcomed into the world with God's name, so they are bid farewell.

The presence of a religious leader is not essential at this time, especially if family and friends are present. If a Muslim chaplain is available, their support and assistance may be appreciated, and the patient and family should be informed of this service. Family members and friends may recite prayers aloud around the bed. Sins are not confessed to another person before death as Muslims believe that it is to God alone that one should repent. However, a dying person may wish to seek forgiveness from another person who they may have wronged.

The Moment of Death

The eyes of the deceased should be closed, and the lower jaw should be gently bound with a strip of cloth to the top of the head, to prevent the mouth from opening. The ankles should also be fastened together with a strip of cloth, to avoid the legs opening. The arms should be placed straight down the side of the body, with the finger straightened. The body should remain fully clothed, and wrapped in a sheet.

If family members are not present at this time, hospital staff should avoid touching the body of the deceased with bare hands. This is more to reassure the family that the body has been handled appropriately, rather than satisfy any religious requirement. It is therefore preferable for staff to wear gloves when handling the body and, ideally to try to ensure that it is dealt with by a person of the same sex as the deceased. The body should be treated with the utmost respect, gentleness and decency and under no circumstances should the body be washed. Washing of the body is a very important duty for Muslims, which the deceased's family or members of the community are obliged to perform.

Preparing the Body

Bathing of the deceased is known as *ghusl*, and is looked upon as an act of great reward. *Ghusl* is an obligatory requirement. The foremost right of bathing the deceased belongs to his or her closest relatives, because this is

their final deed of kindness for their beloved. Several people will be required for this process. An adult male should be bathed by his father, son or brother, and an adult female by her mother, daughter or sister. The more pious people in the community are usually approached to help, although any person of the same gender may assist in the process.

It is best for those washing the body to have performed the *wudhu* (ritual ablution/washing usually performed before prayer), before proceeding. Even in death, respect of a person's modesty must be upheld, and so the body is washed with gloves on and a sheet covering the private parts.

The body is dressed in a clean un-sewn white cloth *kafn* (shroud), which has been pre-cut and folded to the size of the deceased's body. (For more detailed information on bathing and dressing the body see 'Guidelines on death and burial of a Muslim, Muslim Burial Council of Leicestershire, MBCOL)

Once the body is dressed, it may be placed in a coffin (if one is being used), with the face exposed, to enable people to say their final farewells. The body may then be taken to the deceased's home or mosque for people to congregate and see them for one last time.

Funeral Customs

Muslims are required to perform the funeral prayer called *Salat-ul-Janazah*. Anyone can attend this and it is performed before the body is buried. Both the deceased and the people praying are seen to gain reward and benefit from this prayer.

The body is then taken from the mosque to the burial ground. Family, friends and community members will follow the funeral procession, and a final prayer is said at the grave, before the body is laid in its final resting place. The body is placed facing the direction of Makkah.

Method of Disposal

Muslims will always bury the deceased, never cremate, as soon as possible after death. It is believed that the deceased will want to return to the earth from which they came, as soon as possible, and any delay can cause considerable distress to the family. Ideally the body should be buried without a coffin. Some burial grounds in the country will allow for the body to be buried in this way. However if this is not possible, or a coffin is preferred, it should be inexpensive and made of a simple wood.

Although a Muslim grave may be marked, it should be done so in the simplest manner possible. The use of elaborate gravestones and decoration is discouraged.

Mourning Practices

The loss of family or friend is a deeply emotional and difficult time. This is wholly recognised and accepted in Islam, and every individual should be amply supported in their grief, as everyone deals with it differently. Public wailing or lamenting is discouraged though, and family should be consoled with the idea that the person has moved on to a better place, where one day they will be re-united with them.

Some of the information in this section was drawn from "Guidelines on Death and Burial of a Muslim", MBCOL, September 2005